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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 9243  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 2158  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3584  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 9184  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L KATHMANDU 000381

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DEPT FOR SA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/08/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [NP](#)  
SUBJECT: MOSTLY QUIET ELECTION DAY

REF: A. KATHMANDU 346

[1](#)B. KATHMANDU 228  
[1](#)C. KATHMANDU 373  
[1](#)D. KATHMANDU 379

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary  
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[1](#)1. (U) On February 8, for the first time since 1997, Nepalis were able to vote in municipal elections, though few chose to do so, due either to fear of Maoist violence, lack of candidates contesting the election, or calls by major Parties to boycott the elections. Kathmandu was quiet as the government kept vehicles off the roads and security forces protected polling places, arresting some political party activists demonstrating against the polls. Emboffs estimated that the voter turnout in Kathmandu was less than 25 percent, but noted that those voting found well-run polling stations. Outside the capital, Maoists bombed the far western city of Dhangadi, disrupting polling. However, while Maoists continued to clash with the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) on February 7, the general level of Maoist violence on February 8 appeared lower than in the days leading up to the election.  
End Summary.

Kathmandu Quiet as Security Forces Out in Numbers  
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[1](#)2. (U) On February 8, for the first time since 1999, Nepal held elections of any kind. However, due to recent Maoist violence and threats against those participating in the elections, peaceful boycotting by major political parties, and a lack of candidates, turnout for the municipal elections appeared low. Security forces were highly visible in and around the 177 voting stations in Kathmandu, and the capital appeared quiet and peaceful, even though it is also the fourth day of the week-long Maoist bandh (general strike). The government declared election day a holiday, and Home Minister Kamal Thapa ordered security forces to shoot "if there are disruptions or attempts to capture polling booths or spread violence." The government allowed only security and medical vehicles on the Kathmandu roads without passes, though diplomatic-plated cars were also allowed to travel.

Emboffs reported seeing only security and media vehicles on the streets, though small shops were open, and people were out walking the streets. Children played soccer and cricket on normally busy streets near the Embassy.

#### Low Turnout of Candidates as Well as Voters

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13. (SBU) In the first municipal elections held since 1997, Emboffs visited approximately 75 of Kathmandu's 177 polling stations several times throughout the day. They reported seeing few people at most voting booths, but noted that some men, women, young and old were voting. Election officials at several voting stations throughout the city told Emboffs that between the opening of polls at 0800 and 1400, they had a turn-out of less than 25 percent of registered voters. The Election Commission reported that as of 1200, only 10 percent of voters had cast their ballots in the eastern town of Biratnagar and only 12 percent had cast their ballots in the western town of Dailekh. Nationwide, only 15 percent of seats were contested, 54 percent had no candidates, and 31 percent were elected unopposed. There were 1.48 million registered voters in the 36 municipalities with contested elections on February 8. The Election Commission reported that of the 72 parties registered with the Commission, 22 were contesting the elections on February 8.

#### Police Arrest Party Activists

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14. (C) Due to vehicular restrictions, Parties reported that they planned no large demonstrations in the city for February 18. Police told Emboff they had arrested 14 political party members in Kathmandu for protesting the elections on the morning of February 8. Local human rights groups reported that on election day police also arrested more than 20 protesters in Nepal's second largest city of Biratnagar and fired blanks at political party members who tried to destroy voter lists. Media reported that police arrested 9 activists in Birgunj, an industrial city in the eastern terai. These arrests followed the detention of over 150 politicians on February 7. The government continued to hold over 900 party members and civil society activists in detention (ref A).

#### Election Booths Organized and Well Staffed

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15. (U) Emboffs reported that the police and army presence in Kathmandu did not appear threatening and was not interfering with the work of the election officials staffing the polling stations, which were mostly located in schools. Lists of candidates appeared outside voting areas, tables were set up outside for registration, and private booths were set up inside security perimeters for voting. The actual ballot boxes appeared well guarded, though visible to all observers to ensure that only those who had registered voted. In a change from past procedures, the Election Commission was not requiring voting identification cards, and was allowing anyone presenting some form of identification to vote, marking voters' thumbs with indelible ink (ref B).

#### Maoist Nationwide Strike Continues, Enforced with Violence

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16. (U) While election day appeared unhampered by Maoist violence in the capital, the Maoists' February 5-11 general strike continued throughout the country. Maoists detonated numerous bombs in the far western border towns of Dhangadi and Mahendranagar the morning of February 8, causing the District Administrative Office to call a daytime curfew for February 8 in Dhangadi. On February 7, Maoists launched a large attack in the eastern hill town of Dhankuta, targeting nine district administrative offices and abducting 13 people, including the District Regional Administrator. Following the clashes in Dhankuta which killed three people, polling did not start until late in the afternoon of February 8. Leading up to the elections, a Maoist bomb in Kathmandu damaged 12 microbuses, a van, and 15 neighboring houses as the police

tried to defuse it on February 7. Newspapers reported that seven security men, five Maoists and one civilian were killed in separate clashes in Kavre (rim of the Kathmandu Valley), Gaighat (eastern hills), Mahendranagar and Hetauda (eastern terai) on February 7.

#### Political Leaders Renew Call for Boycott

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¶7. (C) On the eve of the election, Nepali Congress leader GP Koirala again appealed to all sections of society to boycott the "so-called meaningless election that is being staged to hijack the people's rights." In a statement issued on February 7, Koirala urged the international community not to recognize the elections. He also called on the government to release all political prisoners. On February 7, United Marxist Leninist (UML) leader MK Nepal also stated that the civic polls were a failure and urged people to boycott the "meaningless" exercise. On February 8, Jhalanath Khanal, UML Central Committee Member told Emboff that all was peaceful and quiet in Kathmandu on election day because "the election is a farce." Minendra Rizal, Nepali Congress-Democratic (NC-D), explained that, without transportation, the Parties could not organize any mass protests on election day. He told Emboff that he had not gone near any polling station and could not comment on the situation in Kathmandu, though he expressed concern over the curfew in Dhangadi. Maoist leader Prachanda issued a press statement on February 7 (the day after his interview in the Kathmandu Post (ref D) where he seemed ready to pursue peace), urging people "not to disgrace yourself by associating in any manner with this election." Prachanda claimed that the elections had "become a matter of entertainment for the civilized world." He closed by appealing "to the seven parties, civil society, and all pro-public forces to unite and move forward for a forceful decisive struggle, instead of reaching any understanding or dialogue."

#### Journalists Pan Polls

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¶8. (C) Journalists uniformly decried to us the low nationwide turnout and asserted that many of those voting were compelled to do so as they worked for the government. Yubaraj Ghimire, editor of vernacular weekly magazine Samay, noting there was a "very low turnout," told Emboff the elections were a "ridiculous show." Kabir Rana, editor of the Nepal weekly tabloid Deshantar, agreed that turnout was "low," but opined that turnout in the terai "was better." According to Narayan Wagley, editor of Nepal's largest vernacular daily Kantipur, "only 10 to 15 percent of the people voted." He noted that "out of that, 7 to 10 percent were people from the security forces and government officials and their family members, to whom vote casting was made compulsory by the government" (ref C). Kanak Dixit, editor of independent monthly magazine Himal South Asian, termed the election a "lackluster exercise...which King Gyanendra should not have implemented." He concluded it was "yet one more definitive failure of the royal regime."

#### Comment

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¶9. (C) The King, Maoists and Parties are probably all going to claim victory following these municipal elections. With security forces keeping violence down in Kathmandu and most large cities, the King is likely to overlook the low number of candidates and lack of participation by the major political parties, and claim a mandate by the people for his continued action plan toward parliamentary elections by April ¶2007. Likewise, citing low voter and candidate turnout, the Maoists will try to claim success in disrupting elections, and the Parties will likely claim success with their peaceful boycott plan. The reality is that the flawed elections were not meaningful. They did not bring people together, but rather succeeded only in deepening divisions. Decisions by the King and the Parties in the coming weeks will determine whether they move toward accommodation - or whether they

drive the country closer to a Maoist takeover.  
MORIARTY